Despite having been told not to judge a book by its cover, we would do well to look at publishers’ bindings. In a nutshell, publishers’ bindings are those identical bindings produced in large quantities for publishers, for sale to an increasingly broad audience. Shown here are some examples from the W.D. Jordan Rare Books and Special Collections at Queen’s University. We will explore the advent of these bindings by looking at a few of the pioneering figures and their publishing initiatives. Publishers’ bindings were, at one and the same time, reflections of the societies in which they emerged and agents of change in the flourishing consumer publishing industry of which they were a critical part. By the end of the nineteenth century, these bindings had in a sense created the modern book, and the modern book fed a need for publishers’ bindings. In this instance, we are certainly cleared to judge a book by its cover.

The story begins with a humble piece of cloth and two key Britons looking to solve a handful of business-related problems. William Pickering, a London publisher, and Archibald Leighton, a binder, simply wished to produce and sell books. As products of their time these two men sought to incorporate three key elements of England’s rapidly industrializing landscape in the production of printed materials: repeatability, consistency, and scaled production.

But first, Pickering and Leighton understood that their vision couldn’t be realized without jettisoning some not-so-humble materials on which bookbinders had previously relied. Prior to the 1820s, the majority of books were sold in quires; with temporary paper wrappers, meant to be bound by the purchaser. Leather was the most popular, but also expensive material, and the bindings were done according to the taste and pocket book of the buyer. Various cloth coverings, such as silk, velvet and canvas (quite common on school texts), had certainly been used previously, but they were specialty bindings arranged by the purchaser, or by the retailer in limited quantities for quick sale.

Pickering wanted to create a binding that was both inexpensive and attractive, to cater to the increasingly literate public. Canvas was not a viable option, and the finer fabrics were expensive to work with and often had issues with strike-through, where the binder’s glue showed through the fabric. To prevent this, and to strengthen the fabric for binding and decoration, Leighton had to size the fabric, probably by using a starch filler. Some scholars dispute Pickering and Leighton’s role in the development of cloth bindings. However, at least one contemporary source considered Pickering’s role substantial enough to warrant explicit credit, which the *Penny Magazine* offered in 1833 by noting that “Mr. Pickering of Chancery Lane, in the last seven years, introduced a cheap and yet neat and substantial binding in cloth.” These modest, early cloth bindings (Fig. 2) with their paper labels served as the foundation for the bindings that followed.

Critically, none of this was possible without another innovation that occurred at this time, allowing for an attractive, inexpensive binding: case bindings. Case bindings, which were manufactured in large numbers, concurrently and independently from the text block, and subsequently glued to the book, made it economically feasible for the publisher to bind in large quantities. Prior to the text block being attached to the cover, the cloth could be embossed with a grain, and in 1832, when gold was stamped onto the book cloth, the method by which books were produced was changed forever.

Nor was the case binding the only technology that helped Pickering along. Initially, the cloth as Pickering first used it remained undorned. In the 1830s, the texture of the cloth was further enhanced by ribbon embossing which was done to make the appearance of the covers more appealing. However, this technique was expensive, and its use soon faded away and was soon replaced by other decorative means. The introduction of the Imperial arming press in 1832, as a means of blocking the cloth in gold, made a lasting impression.

To begin with, only the spines were blocked in gold, but this soon gave way to greater use. Central vignettes, blocked in gold on the upper boards added visual interest to the covers, and these pictorials, frequently framed with borders, could be found on both boards in the 1840s (Fig. 3).

Successive publishers in Britain and the U.S. took
these innovations and ran with them. Lavishly embellished gift books, especially around the holidays, became common in the 1850s and 1860s. These books tended to be collections of poetry or the works of contemporary, well-known authors. The red cloth cover of *Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, by Robert Wilmott, richly decorated with gold with the lower board stamped in the blind, is by designer John Sliegh (Fig. 4) Even the joy of the holidays, however, couldn’t overcome the limitations brought about by the American Civil War. As a result of the war, the economic climate in the United States was changing, and gold was being used less frequently on bindings. “Dutch gold,” a less expensive copper and zinc alloy that was rolled flat and then used as a blocking foil was sometimes used in its place.\(^5\) Meanwhile, cover designers such as Sliegh, John Leighton and others in England, began signing their work. In the US, it was the engravers, or die-sinkers, such as John Feely and William M. Tompsoon, who were leaving their mark. It would be a few decades yet before American designers began to sign their work in earnest.

Black ink, in addition to the gold blocking, was added to the mix in the 1870s. Inserts and paper onlays were added to the boards, such as in *Moore’s Poetical Works*, published in London in 1877, where a central floral cameo and a surrounding black-stamped floral design on brown cloth, provide for a visually stunning cover (Fig. 5). At the same time, asymmetry and the Japanese influence that was evident in other areas of design in the US found its way onto the front boards, and the Arts and Crafts movement, with William Morris as its figurehead, was gaining momentum in Britain and to a lesser extent in North America.\(^6\) The use of coloured inks became prevalent in the 1880s, as seen in the distinctive and impressive binding of *The Complete Works of Tennyson* (Fig. 6), with its dramatic use of black, red and gold colour blocking on green cloth.

These trends continued into the last decade of the century, along with several new influences, namely the rise of the book designer in the U.S., leading to a period of tremendous diversity. Included in this group of artists were a number of female book designers. Sarah Wyman Whitman being one of the earliest, who did much of her work for Houghton, Mifflin. Frequently, she signed her bindings with her initials inside of a flaming heart. Amy Sacker designed thousands of covers, many of which were reused on different bindings. She is known for her figurative compositions, which used the entire upper board, as is seen in her signed binding for *Under the Lilacs*, by Louisa May Alcott. (Fig. 1). Not all signatures were initials; Walter Crane signed his bindings with a rebus of a crane, and W.W. Denslow identified his with a seahorse monogram.\(^7\)

Canada, very much part of the North Atlantic triangle’s cultural exchange, experienced the same changes that led to the need for less expensive books in Britain and the US: increased immigration during the first half of the nineteenth century and rising literacy rates led to a greater demand for affordable books. However, the expanding population was spread out, making it difficult for booksellers, and retailers, to properly market their products. Printing
presses existed, the first known example in Canada in 1752, with the printing of the *Halifax Gazette* by John Bushell, but the presses were mostly for printing government material, pamphlets and newspapers, and not suited for printing books.\(^8\)

One additional factor hampered the advent of a native publishing industry in Canada. Given the state of Canadian publishing circa the 1870s, Canadian authors were forced to seek external publishing outlets for their work. This, in turn, limited the need for publishing innovations. And so it went, as these two factors were mutually reinforcing until the 1920s. For instance, James DeMille, a successful author of boys’ adventure books in the 1870s, whose stories were based on his childhood in Nova Scotia, never had any dealings with Canadian publishers, instead relying on American publishers. Alternatively, authors had to pay for the printing themselves. The poet Isabella Valency Crawford’s only book, *Old Spookses’ Pass*, first issued in 1884 with the imprint of James Bain & Son, Toronto, was paid for by Crawford herself. It was issued in cheap paper covers, and is riddled with many errors. As Bain was known for newspaper printing, it is unclear why Crawford chose this printer, and in the end, only about 50 copies were sold.\(^9\) Identifying Canadian bindings as such, is a difficult task. Many of the books either have American covers, or the printer would insert their own title page after receiving the books from the US or Britain.\(^10\) Although scarce, there are some early Canadian publishers’ bindings of note, such as is found on *The Life and Labors of Most Rev. John Joseph Lynch*, by Hugh Charles McKeown, which has a pictorial design in gold on fine-ribbed, diagonal cloth. Published in 1886 in Montreal and Toronto by J.A. Sadlier, the illustration is of St. Michael’s Cathedral, Toronto. (Fig. 7) It wasn’t until the 1920s, however, that Canada started producing publishers’ bindings in great quantity and quality, just as cloth publishers’ bindings in England and the US gave way to the paper dust jacket.

The story of publishers’ bindings, though brief, is significant in the overall history of the book. Growth
and innovation were fuelled by the perceived needs of an emerging reading public per se. Moreover, specific technical and aesthetic developments reflected ideas and material constraints of the societies from which they emerged. Examples drawn from different decades illustrate the local and regional variations. Canada, meanwhile, was something of a story within a story. Full of potential, a few circumstances unique to Canada nevertheless frustrated and delayed the development of a significant book publishing industry for several decades. Unfortunately, scholarship on the history of Canadian bindery has also been similarly slow to develop. Fortunately, and in contrast to the history itself, there are no constraints on the resources necessary for expediting Canadian scholarship. As the examples used in this piece, along with many others held in Queen’s University Library, there is a ready aperture for exploring the Canadian case. Researchers merely need to take a peek.

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Notes

5 Ibid. 21.